

BOOK REVIEW

THE JOURNEY WITHIN

by

I.N.C. Aniebo
Heinemann: London, 1978

The Journey Within portrays the progress of two Igbo marriages, a Christian marriage, and a traditional marriage.

Nelson is a fitter in an engine-shed at the railway at Port Harcourt in 1939. He is married to a young girl, Ejiaka; they have a very warm conjugal life. Nelson strongly believes in his traditions. Although he is living in a colonial town wants to remain entirely faithful to the values recognized by his fathers. Even his conversion to Christianity is more of a flirt than an adhesion to Christian ethics and values; in fact he resigns from the church after a while, unable to accept that churchgoers pay dues to the church.

Of those who embraced the new religion was Christian, the shopkeeper. His wife Janet is a staunch believer in the Lord. In opposition to Nelson's marital life, the conjugal life of Christian can hardly be called a marriage. From a romantic marriage with Janet, their life grows through a series of unhappy events into a total disaster climaxing in the accidental death of Christian.

The Journey Within casts a panoramic view on the destiny of two families. The entire novel is skillfully structured against the pattern of the parallel movements of Nelson-Ejiaka and Christian-Janet, the two family nuclei around which all actions take place.

The novel is divided into three parts. In parts I and II, the reader's attention shifts from one scene to the other, from Ejiaka to Janet, from Christian to Nelson, or from one friendship nucleus to the other such as Nelson-Christian, Ejiaka-Janet, back and forth. Thus the novel opens with the birth of Okechukwu, first son of Nelson. This is followed by the nearly tragic misfortune of Christian: the old husband of Angela, his mistress, sends a gang to beat him up. He is found lying, unconscious, in the muddy bush. While an unfortunate conjugal misbehaviour leads Nelson to seek consolation with Madame Obo, an old bar-keeper, Christian's shop is burgled at night when he is in bed, dead-drunk. Ironically, he wakes up from a rather sensuous dream to discover the catastrophe.

In part III, events accumulate and both marriages follow a decisive curve. Providence - and what a providence! - has it that Nelson is divorced by Madame Obo; hence his reconciliation with Ejiaka. A year later she has a miscarriage. But then, Nelson gets promoted to fitter, Grade One. Once more Ejiaka conceives. Her road is full of hope. In contrast, Christian goes mad and dies in a car accident. On her way to Port Harcourt to her husband's funeral, Janet is raped in the train by three soldiers. From this unhappy event her dearest dream is fulfilled. She conceives and gives birth to a boy.

It has been said that in the history of colonisation, the missionary always preceded the soldier ("For he who is coming after me is mightier than I"!?). If other writers have investigated the relationship between religious indoctrination and economic exploitation, not many have examined its long-term consequence on peoples' minds. In *The Journey Within* Aniebo has really put his finger on this question, and many more. Since "everybody buries his fathers in his own head", what are the consequences that derive from disobeying them? Is it not alienating to reject one's own culture? What is the responsibility of parents in this case? What is the significance of marriage in Igbo society? All these questions are carefully examined in the development of this novel.

The Journey Within is located at Port Harcourt, a colonial town. But the city as an active place of production and consumption is ignored. The reader has no idea of what Port Harcourt looked like in 1939. From a historical perspective we know that the period in which the largest part of the novel is encapsulated corresponds to the years of war in Europe: 1939-1944. Yet there is no mention of the war, not even of its remote consequences on African workers for whom this period was very important in the revival of political struggle against colonial rule. The 1945 general strike is known to have been the railway workers' thing primarily.

The place itself - Port Harcourt - bears an important function in the dynamics of the forces at work in a colonial town: it will suffice to remember that it was not only one of the oldest and most important ports in Nigeria, but the place of transaction par excellence; the place where the train meets the boat. All social activities underlying these elements are ignored in the novel. How can one write history if one ignores history?

I would have accused the writer of blurring history in his novel, if it had not occurred to me that the novel is a journey within. Within what? Within the minds of these characters, within the psychology of people who are living a material life, the effect of which they cannot see.

The Journey Within is an archetypal representation of modern African town-dwellers. In that sense Aniebo has successfully created characters that are real. They strike more by their differences than by their similarities. Complex characters such as Ejiaka interact with alienated characters such as Christian and simple characters such as Nelson.

In his second novel, Aniebo has improved his style considerably. I cannot resist offering the following passage as an illustration of good stylistic work. The entire passage is built on the form of a traditional dirge. The phrase "choking, and crying, and dying" is not just a leitmotiv, but a pregnant phrase that bears all of the other memories attached to Janet's particular experience. Sitting down in the shop, she starts thinking once more about herself, and about her unfulfilled pregnancies.

What was Christian doing and where? Her vigil reminded her of when her second-to-last child had died at the age of five, the longest any of her children had agreed to remain on earth. Actually it was wrong to say he had died. He had gone away. One moment he was there eating supper and the next he was choking and crying, and dying. And Christian was out seeing a customer from whom he hoped to get an order of two suits.

Choking, and crying, and dying! She did not know what to do, or rather she knew there was nothing she could do. Barely six months before she had buried her youngest that had gone away in his sleep without a whimper, without even saying good-bye.

So she sat where she had been knitting a sweater for him, and watching him struggle with whoever had come to take him away. He really put up a struggle, which was understandable - there was nothing she had not done to keep him, to make him happy and comfortable. Her love for him had known no bounds, and even Christian had complained it was excessive. Yet, she felt no emotion as she watched him grapple with them. She knew, as soon as the battle was joined, that he would lose. That hard knowledge kept her in her chair. Also, the fact that he did not look at her once, did not cry out for help as children often do, made it easier.

Choking, and crying, and dying! They took him

away. And he did not make one human sound. She did not touch him. She did not continue knitting. She did nothing. She sat there, staring into space, waiting for Christian. Out of the corner of her eye but in the center of her mind's eye, she saw her child keel over on his right side, his small hands, beautiful hands, clutched at his small throat. His knees bunched up his khaki jumper to his chest, the plates of pounded yam and ogbono soup waited with a forlorn air to be eaten.

Later, Christian has said the sight, when he walked into the room in the early hours of the morning, had bound his feet to the floor.

It took her three weeks to cry for the dead child. It took her that long because when they performed an autopsy they found nothing in his throat. The doctor even doubted whether the child had actually choked to death. What could she say? Death did not always knock before it entered, nor did it always leave a trail.¹

The Journey Within is full of insight, very well-written and enticing. It is an outstanding work of literary creation. One can already see in its author a lot of promise.

The symbolism in the book is very significant. The image of the train in the novel is as important to the individual characters as it is to African societies. To conclude, let us look to the words of the author:

*The train rushed on into the night, slowing, stopping, starting again, rushing, waiting, steaming, and once or twice running with a disjointed clanging that told more about how it felt than any 'B' examination would. But that did not mean the train would not be on the tracks the next day. It would go through the same distances, the same motions, and achieve the same destinations till it was scrapped. For if the creator of the train had not built into it the power to find out the meaning of its journeys, or even to think about it and reason it all out, then the best it could do was to keep on moving.*²

Footnotes

1. Aniebo, I.N.C. *The Journey Within* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 179.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

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Chike C. Aniakor, *Moonlight Play*

